



God's Waiting Room

By *Julienne Gage*

I rarely opened the curtains to look at the old Cuban ladies who lived in the two-story Art Deco building of efficiency apartments running parallel behind the nearly identical building where I lived in Miami Beach's historic South Beach. The structures were so close, it almost felt invasive. I did, however, come to know their voices and their cantankerous personalities as they shouted at each other on the communal balcony where they gathered each morning.

"Mi hijita, I told you to eat your breakfast," I'd hear one scold the other.

"Mi amor, I told you to take your pills," the other would retort.

In the evenings, my own neighbors, largely made up of creative Gen Xers from across the United States, Europe, and Latin America, would gather on our own communal balcony, sharing beers and news of our work days as freelance journalists, artists, restaurant managers, webmasters, and graphic designers. We'd joke that if the grim studies about saving for retirement were true, we might just stay in these humble quarters forever. Heck, we'd probably still be yelling at Frank, a youthful Baby Boomer from Germany who loved beer and rollerblading, to turn down his bloody techno music.

That was the early 2000s, a time when Miami Beach was still somewhat affordable. It was a time when old people, immigrants, interns, and young professionals all found community in the area's pastel Art Deco and Mid-Century Modern architecture made intimate by those shared balconies, courtyards, and front patios, located walking distance to the beach, the bay, the public pool and park, and several pedestrian promenades.

Today, I'm reflecting on ideas for late life urbanism from the perch of another, more updated communal balcony in a South Beach Mid-Century complex, one with a luxurious bay view. I'd like to say that puts me at ease, but the highlights of last night's dinner with the neighbors were great wine and food, nice conversation, and a lot of uncomfortable laughter about the inevitable end to our best-salaried years and questions about who will care for us when we're no longer employable.

I don't have any easy answers, but I do know, that I chose this neighborhood – and more specifically this building - after an eight-year stint in Washington, DC, precisely because I wanted to feel close to my neighbors. Living in areas with communal features is something I came to appreciate after leaving my suburban home in Spokane, Washington in the 1990s to travel the world for graduate studies in anthropology and journalism.





In Old Havana, I enjoyed the constant street theater of neighbors playing dominoes on the sidewalk or tossing brooms from one balcony to another, engaging in conversation whether they knew each other or not. From my balcony window in Madrid's cozy Malasaña neighborhood, I could hear my classmates coming and going from the bars, so I'd run down to join them for a drink. In Washington, DC's aptly named Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, the front porches of old Victorian row houses got neighbors surveilling the streets during crime spikes, and hosting Halloween block parties for kids from neighborhoods so tough they'd never gotten to try trick or treating.

So many of these features – except maybe lots of stairs – are important to healthy aging. They help you see and hear your neighbors, to recognize needs, and to even coordinate informal care. That's going to be vital as the world's population lives longer but not necessarily better.

According to *2016 data from the US Census Bureau*, the world's aging population is the fastest growing age cohort, increasing from 8.5 percent for a population of 7 billion in 2015 to 17 percent of 10 billion people by 2050. We can already see the devastating effects on the environment and our access to food water, not to mention the rising cost of healthcare. At this rate, it's easy to imagine how older people might suffer or even choose to end their suffering through suicide, unless, of course, we start coming up with some cooperative solutions. And while these days the world imagines South Beach as this decadent land of warm weather and hot bodies, constant nightlife, and spring break revelry, its history has a lot to offer the architects, designers, and urban planners building for a far more golden population.



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South Beach is a serendipitous place to be exploring this topic, not only because of its architecture but because about four decades ago its elder population had become so large it earned the nickname "God's Waiting Room."

A new documentary called *The Last Resort* does an excellent job of depicting just that. The film centers on archival photos and film shot in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Andy Sweet and Gary Monroe, two young Miami Beach natives. They had recently graduated from photography school together and realized they both had a keen interest in documenting the end of a unique era in Miami Beach history, one in which tens of thousands of Jewish retirees, many of them Holocaust survivors, took up residence in the area's aging hotels and apartment complexes.

"Imagine South Beach today, but instead of seeing everybody between 18 and 28, think of everybody between like 81 and 82," quips a source in the film.

"What do you do for fun?" Asked one of the photographers capturing the characters in the 1970s.

"Nothing. Just sit on the porch," responded the elderly woman he was filming.

Miami Beach is a coastal municipality of natural and man-made islands, the largest being the original barrier key where South Beach sits today. It has been inhabited for over 100 years, but it was the dawn of the air conditioning unit, combined with US expansion of infrastructure, transportation, and the rise of the



middle class right to a paid vacation that really put it on the map in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, it became a hot spot for artists, musicians, actors, celebrities, and even bootleggers like Al Capone. It was a place where you didn't need exorbitant amounts of money to enjoy a little beach, sunshine, and social life.

It wasn't a utopia. Jim Crow laws prohibited people of color from staying here, and some businesses were off limits to Jewish people. But for many Americans, it was still a place where you didn't need exorbitant amounts of money to enjoy a little beach, sunshine, and social life.

"I believe most architects in Miami Beach were trying to figure out how to build good quality housing in a town that had been planned for suburban bungalows," reflected Miami architect and historic preservationist Allan T. Shulman. The idea was to give small-scale apartment complexes the feeling of single-family homes.

"Through a process of trial and error, they developed strategies that bridged the suburban quality of the original plan and the metropolitan situation that evolved there," he explained. "Front yards, side yards, courtyards: these were not just social spaces, they constituted the organizational fabric of the buildings on long and narrow lots. It was a beautiful convergence of utility and amenity."

Shulman says low and mid-scale multi-family housing "flew in the face" of popular 20th Century American planning models, as did the "modernist" character of its buildings. "One lesson of Miami Beach is that urbanism is good, and that it can be bal-

anced with a lot of civic amenity," Shulman said.

By the 1940s, Miami Beach was supporting the war effort, with the military turning those apartments and hotels into barracks and using the parks and beaches as training grounds for WWII. In the 1950s, South Beach saw another resurgence in tourism, as well as growth in Mid-Century Modern architecture, but by the 1970s, South Beach had lost its novelty for young out-of-town visitors. But now unsegregated, its good weather, charm, walkability, and mostly vacant small-sized rental properties looked pretty appealing to northern garment workers cashing in on their pensions and looking for a comfortable place to live and create meaning in their final years.

The Last Resort depicts these older people helping each other into the waves for sunrise swimming, partying like college kids in Art Deco lounges during New Year's, playing music, reading the newspaper, and holding political discussions in Flamingo Park, or just lounging around the airy spaces of their apartment buildings.

"There was this notion of a cruise ship," former Miami Beach Community Development Corporation CEO Denis Russ told me. He moved to Miami Beach as a child in 1947. "Private living areas were small, like cabins on boats, but public areas were expansive. We used to joke that anytime you left a light on after dark you could attract a group of people. Going home and staying in small units was less socially satisfying than going to a meeting."

The documentary talks about this experience as a catharsis for people who had suffered and survived the horrors of the





Holocaust or the struggles of working in the garment industry. But the experience was short lived. Just as many elders began passing away, political conflicts and drug wars in Latin America and the Caribbean began to grow.

First came the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. That year, Cuban President Fidel Castro told his citizens that for a limited time, he would allow those disgruntled with his Communist regime to leave. He also opened up the Cuban prisons and shipped some of his worst criminals with them. By October of that year, some 125,000 Cubans had boated across the Strait of Florida to Miami, where they were granted asylum. A few years later, Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar took up residence in a Mid-Beach flamingo pink mansion conveniently located on the bay for easy boat access.

As *The Last Resort* documentary well notes, the vast majority of Miami's refugee and immigrant population were honest, hard-working people in search of a quiet, affordable life. But unemployment and the rise of drug trafficking certainly changed the dynamics of the beach. Elder people no longer felt safe lounging about on their front patios in lawn chairs where they might get mugged, and anyone who left a lawn chair unaccompanied would likely return to find it missing.

Miami Beach Public Historian Jeff Donnelly and his wife, both retired school teachers, were in their 40s when they first rented a two-bedroom beach view apartment 1986 for \$750, two months free rent, and one year free parking for two cars.

"Nobody thought they wanted to live here, but I knew there were

hundreds of thousands of people who would want to have the apartment we just got," recalled Donnelly.

Other historic preservationists saw the same thing, but contrary to popular belief, they formed the Miami Design Preservation League hoping that saving the buildings could save the residents. They even created the Miami Beach Development Corporation, producing 1,000 affordable units. These spaces housed the service workers, the elderly, and immigrants and refugees, including a new batch arriving from political and economic strife in Haiti.

By the 1990s, South Beach began to transition once again as preservationists revitalized the area, turning Lincoln Road into a pedestrian mall, repairing the stucco along a charming Andalusian-style street called Española Way, and bringing back the vibrant colors that once highlighted the Art Nouveau and Deco features of hotels on Ocean Drive. Immigrant residents started families, hosting birthday parties and other holiday occasions on the beach, at the park, and, of course, on the balconies, courtyards, and patios. Donnelly remembers those setback lawn and patio spaces - measuring about 35 feet on the front of most buildings - became a place where Latin American and Caribbean families would open their parties to everyone.

"On the 24th of December, every third block you'd see a roasting pig," he recalled.

By the time I moved to Miami Beach in 2002, the area was a pretty great place to be just about anybody. With many of its most historic properties repainted and renovated and a cul-





tural life representing a wide range of races, nationalities, age groups, and income levels, it was totally vibrant. Even hurricanes became a cause of impromptu celebrations. Before hitting New Orleans at top speeds, Katrina's eye took a little tour through Miami, leaving much of the beach without power for days. No matter. We bought Haitian vodou candles from a dollar store, pulled our thawing meats from the freezer, whipped up Argentine chimichurri sauce, and cooked up gregarious parties in a tropical yard that looked like a fairy garden from all the twinkling light.

The sense of camaraderie in buildings like ours became so evident that a Miami Herald reporter even came to a breakfast on our common balcony for a story she was writing called "Generation Broke." She learned, for example, that we would rather help each other with repairs than call the landlord and risk a possible rent hike for upkeep. We brought food to each other when we were sick or broke an arm and couldn't cook. One neighbor, who got pregnant and decided to raise a family in the building's only two-bedroom apartment, named our residence the Hippie Mansion. And all the while, we still giggled whenever we heard the handyman next door resolving issues for those old Cuban ladies. We could tell that he was more than just a guy who unplugged their toilets or cleaned their windows. He became more like a de facto social worker, bringing them groceries, taking them to doctor appointments.

I have to admit, it was sad when some of those scratchy old voices disappeared from the daily cacophony I heard through the window. That was just one of the losses I began to feel as Miami's construction industry boomed and then crashed, mak-

ing more room for the upwardly mobile while zapping a lot of middle-class jobs.

In the early 2000s, one major developer broke a height moratorium just north of South Point Park, where Biscayne Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean and cruise ships sail out to the Caribbean. Now called "South of Fifth" (street), this area has been repopulated by a number of tall, luxury residences with shops and restaurants on the first floor. These days, it's a nice place to stroll over for a fine cup of coffee or a gourmet gelato, but every time I do, my heart aches a little for the end of an era even I can recall. Up until 2007, there were still a lot of pastel-colored wooden bungalows and shotgun shacks with old people and immigrants relaxing in the yard, reading the Torah or the newspaper, or grilling up fish and steaks.

In fact, wandering over there makes me so nostalgic that on the way home, I walk up the tree-lined Meridian Avenue next to Flamingo Park. There, I can still set my eyes on a handful of well-kept bungalows or admire the paint jobs and modern, hard-to-steal lawn furniture now adorning some of the courtyards and patios of renovated Art Deco apartment complexes. On cooler days, it's still possible to spot a patio Quinceañera celebration (a rite of passage for Latina girls turning 15), or a barbecue full of Central American service workers who've gathered to watch a soccer tournament.

But there is less and less of that. I blame part of it on the rise of digital and social media. People, young and old, US or foreign-born, just don't socialize as much in person as the way we did a little over a decade ago. Rent prices have gone up so much





that many elderly people and service workers can no longer afford to stay on the beach, or if they do, they're working two jobs to make ends meet. Many of those patios are now blank slabs of concrete or bike racks. At least that's a feature suggesting a lower crime rate –bike stealing was big business a few years ago.

It's hard to say where all these former South Beach residents go. For a time, many moved inland to Miami proper, but extreme commuter traffic and flooding from sea level rise in low lying areas have sent high-end developers into Miami's central working class neighborhoods like the predominantly black areas of Overtown, Liberty City, West Coconut Grove or Little Haiti, uprooting those historic communities with gentrification.

Despite immense engineering efforts to create pump systems that flush out sea water during king tides, Miami Beach could very well be underwater in 30 years. But that's not such a big deal to wealthy people buying condos for seasonal use or moving their illicit money around.

In 30 years, I'll be in my 70s, and I don't suppose I'll have the resources to retire. I'm okay with that, provided I'm in good health and the job market has evolved to respect and appreciate older workers. But every day that I walk out onto my common balcony or stroll over to the supermarket, I wonder where I'll live, who my neighbors will be, and how design and architecture could improve our sense of belonging to each other.

I didn't move back to Miami for the architecture or the beaches. I actually moved here to work on a magazine about engaging Cuba, one that fell apart after the Trump Administration rolled back a more open policy toward the island. I did, however, understand that the changing dynamics of large cities, combined with the busy realities of my old 40-something Miami friends, would require a careful reboot of my social life. That's how I ended up in another building with common balconies on which I correctly predicted that Christmas and New Year's parties would be celebrated with the friends I made in the apartments next door. And at least those busy friends who remained on South Beach to raise families can find the time to meet me for coffee and grocery shopping at that neighborhood Whole Foods. I guess that's our not-so-mom-and-pop version of the old Jewish community's daily grocery trips. Truly, the people make the space, and the architecture and urban layout helps to put them there. One of the highlights of delving into this project is that it forced me to do more than just hold open doors or pull grocery bags into the elevator for the handful of retirees in my building. It's made me actually engage them in more meaningful ways.

Thanks to this story, I spend more time in the lobby or at the pool chatting it up with the heiress of my building, whose late husband designed its original architecture. I discovered Russ is also a frequent Whole Foods shopper and a great conversationalist. He even gave me a tour of the old one-bedroom he rented and eventually bought and renovated a stone's throw away, just so I would feel it was a warm, inviting place to chat when





I got lonely. One morning, he drove me down to Joe's Stone Crabs, Miami Beach's oldest dining venue, and a Jewish one at that. We shared coffee, cornflake-crust French toast, and a deep talk about how to build out a city that is multicultural, multigenerational, and welcoming and affordable to all.

His radical ideas make me smile, even worry a little about who in this town so shaped by Cold War politics is listening to our discussion. It feels about as lively as the ones he says he used to hear when Miami Beach was full of retired old factory workers.

"We were populated by people who came out of the northeast labor unions - leftists and progressives - even some communists - all interested in social and political engagement," he said as he took a swig of coffee. He doesn't have any silver-bullet policy solution for keeping South Beach or any other Miami neighborhood affordable for elderly folks on limited means. Neither does Shulman, although he assures me the much of the architecture will remain.

"They are protected by Historic Preservation laws. The new higher density has been layered in. This ability to grow by accreting new scales, new environments, without ever totally losing what was there before, is an asset," he said.

Today when I walk the streets of Miami Beach, I feel less urgency to save every last structure or a desire to save my money to invest in a little South Beach condo that may literally be un-

der water in my lifetime. What I feel is a sense of curiosity. The whole of Florida still has many intimate Art Deco and Mid-Century Modern communities with similar features. Washington, DC and many other large cities still have plenty of Victorian and Bungalow-era front porches. These are features we can preserve or recreate in new structures. Meanwhile, urban planners all across America are considering how to integrate multiple generations into new apartment complexes that sit along metro rail lines or near hospitals and clinics. If there's a way to keep them affordable, then maybe I'll be able to have the community support I'll need in my golden years. For now, I'm grateful to be part of a cohort of media professionals seeking lessons in the stories of these historic places.

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